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Novices again don cloak and dagger



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So many of our institutions and myths have fallen into disrepair amid the shocks and shifts of modern history that the catalog makes for dismal reading. Particularly when you cannot figure out whether the institutions were afflicted first, and thereby, undermined the myths, or if rapidly crumbling myths have debilitated the institutions they helped create and sustain.

The intelligence establishment has taken unusually severe lumps in recent years—repeatedly coming up with wrong facts and worst guesses, tripping over its own cloak and clumsily sitting down on its own dagger. Cruellest of all for a secret service, it hasn't even been able to keep its major failures a secret.

Or, at any rate, let's pray there isn't a whole roomful of worse ones we still haven't heard about yet. That scary possibility, of course, raises further ambiguous feelings about institutions and myths.

We want our intelligence spooks to keep at least one cunning jump ahead of the opposition, and we consider it important that the bad guys respect their capacity to do so. However, it also is vital for us to know whether our own intelligence agencies are really all that intelligent and functioning as effectively as we expect.

It's no use just asking them. (They will insist they are doing a peachy job and would easily prove it if the details weren't so secret.) The only way to satisfy ourselves is to demand explanations of their performance, but they might expose errors and thereby blow the myth of institutional infallibility.

Nonetheless, we hope our allies and enemies go on believing the shaky myth. In fact, we would very much like to keep believing ourselves. It used to be easier.

As opposed to those traitorous swine employed by the other side, our spies had Nathan Hale as a model of patriotic chivalry. Surely their gentlemanly exploits were in our best national interest; surely no decent American need fear any extremes of zeal from such guardian knights.

We have, alas, been dragged deeper into the world's naughtiness since then. The Cold War has involved us in dirty tricks to advance nasty enterprises of the sort we once cited as proof of the enemy's unpardonable wickedness. And of which, despite revealed facts to the contrary, we still prefer to think ourselves incapable.

This is a tough time for purity myths. We aren't sure if we should be most appalled because the CIA conspired with Mafia goons to assassinate Fidel Castro, or because these criminal partners proved to be so idiotically inept.

The truth is bad enough, but a whole generation's worth of Cold War fiction also has helped corrupt our innocence with stories of the low company that our spies keep, their questionable motives, tactics and loyalties—and the incompetent policy, triple-cross duplicity and competitive personal ambitions shown by their spy-masters.

Formerly, any American agent who wasn't a clear-eyed Army captain temporarily seconded from regular duties for a tricky undercover assignment in Istanbul was most likely Fred MacMurray, a professor of linguistics reluctantly persuaded to interrupt his European sabbatical and go take a peek at some suspicious German activity on the Baltic coast. Their amateur standing saved them from the professional excesses (or doctrinaire

mistakes) we've learned to deplore and come to expect.

A strange recent news story makes me wonder if a cycle has turned, reopening opportunities for non-trade-school spooks—even though it obviously does not promise to restore the old high moral tone of the calling.

The unofficially moonlighting operative in question is Douglas Schlafler Sr., 38, of Upperville, Va. A federal indictment in Washington accuses him (in absentia) of shipping explosives to Libya and training terrorists there.

He is named as an accomplice to Edwin Wilson and Frank Terpil, a pair of rogue ex-CIA agents who have sullied the old company tie by going over to the dread Moammar Khadafy. We hate this mad dictator so much we tend to forget that thousands of other American citizens are employed with full Washington approval to keep Libya's petroleum industry functioning and providing funds for Khadafy's mischief.

However, what fascinates me about Schlafler is his unlikely background. Or maybe that his career suggests how easy it is for an unskilled apprentice to succeed in the international skullduggery business.

According to the feds, Schlafler was working at a hometown service station in 1976, when Wilson hired him to manage his Virginia estate. Within a few years, the former gas pumper and caretaker turned up as president of Delex International, a Washington-based consulting and (ahem) marketing firm, also owned by Wilson.

A real Horatio Alger story, it proves that diligence and on-the-job training can lead to really fun stuff like smuggling explosives, training terrorists and foreign travel. (Schlafler is now thought to be hiding out in Burundi.) As an example of free enterprise, it puts those mushy-headed liberal Job Corps programs to shame.

Of course, he could have had a natural bent for the profession. He probably was the guy who made car-repair estimates at the service station.